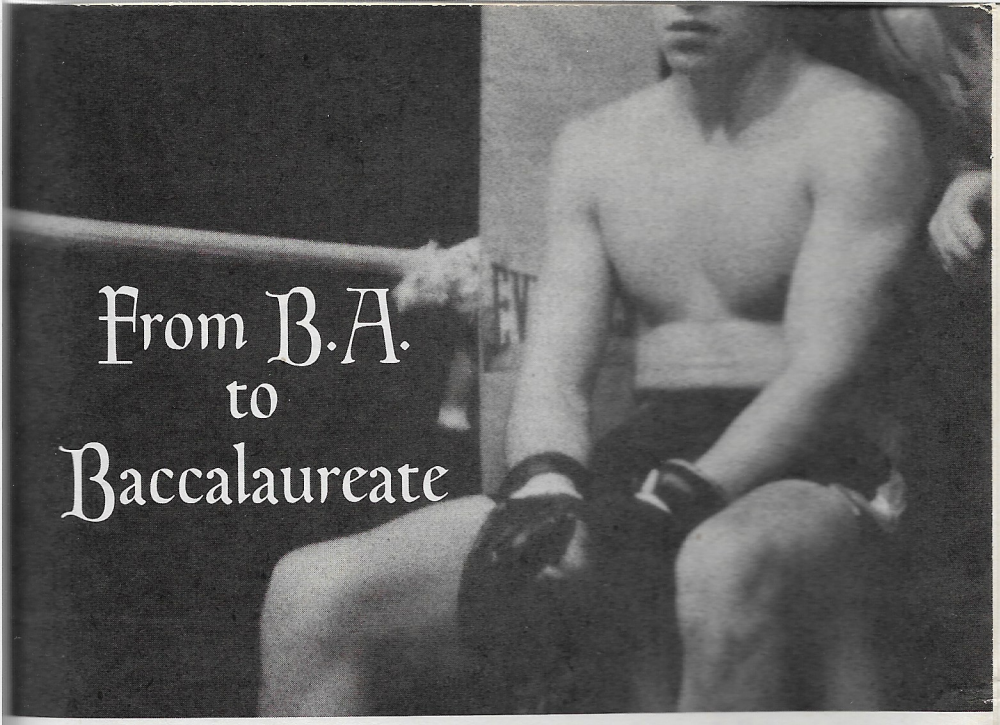

From B.A. to Baccalaureate

A tough guy goes to school

I took my first drink when I was thirteen. I had just returned from a boxing club where I was training for the Canadian Championships. I met up with some friends and decided to take my first nip. There was nothing smart about it; I simply crumbled to peer pressure.

Soon afterward, my friend Bob and I stole liquor and beer from his father's inexhaustible supply. The boxing dream and the Olympics became a distant memory. My energy was consumed with getting high and stoned every weekend. This continued until two high schools ejected me for delinquency, impertinence, and fighting. My attitude deteriorated and it wasn't long — on my sixteenth birthday — before I landed in jail for stealing a car while intoxicated. I almost killed myself that day when I drove the car directly into a cement hydro pole that toppled onto the vehicle's roof.

So started my life of crime. I no longer associated with former school friends, but rather acquainted myself with criminals, hoods,

and delinquents I had met in jail, and those I encountered in bars, parties, and on the streets.

I stepped into an entirely foreign world without blinking an eye. The world of prisons, scams, takedowns, and violence descended upon me like a dark cloud and I never paused to reflect on this drastic step.

I was now counted among the tough street kids one sees on street corners or the front pages of newspapers. My name appeared in the local rag for crimes and I became a regular in courtrooms. I racked up time in the local bucket in an effort to become accepted by the gang. My friends were all bandits, many of whom had spent years in reformatories and Canada's roughest and most notorious penitentiaries. They became my heroes and role models.

Then one fateful night, the inevitable happened. I killed a man in a bar fight. The ensuing legal battle and emotional roller coaster put me in a tailspin.

My time in prison was harsh, almost surrealistic. I became so demented and dangerous that several orders were filed to have me placed in special handling units, those prisons within prisons reserved for the most violent men. The authorities feared that I would kill again, so they tried to prevent my parole application through a practice called gating. My institutionalization was so thorough that I incurred over one hundred institutional charges and served over four hundred days in solitary confinement while incarcerated. I was even feared by the fearsome in jail. There is a process by which men are driven insane in jail and I daresay I crossed that line while inside those awful mechanical monstrosities.

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They let me out. God only knows why I did not kill anyone else before I found AA, or rather, before AA found me.

I resumed drinking and began using a variety of drugs along with beer. I got so drunk and stoned that I lost all control and thought nothing of the consequences of my

behavior. I discharged my gun at parties, shot at highway signs, and planned a killing spree. My decline was steep, deep, and demented.

I got married and had a son during this time, who became my blessing. After he was born, I somehow convinced my wife to attend treatment.

This was the act of providence that turned on me and made me a forced referral. Not many of us come willingly to AA; many arrive with a gun to our head, a boss on our heels, or a wife with a threat. In my case, it was an enlightened wife with a baby boy she would not let me see until I attended AA. The treatment center had turned her against me, I reasoned, and I was plenty sore for that. The sense of betrayal and hurt was palpable. Despite my resentment, I attended my first AA meeting in a church basement. I only attended because I wanted to see my son and wife again. As far as I was concerned, I was okay and did not have a drinking problem.

During this time, an elderly gentleman took me under his wing and introduced me to the Big Book. He carefully took me through the Steps and taught me about the nature of the disease. Of all people who could have become my sponsor, this man happened to be a former lawyer I had never wanted to see again. Yet he became a genuine and bona fide lifesaver.

It took some patience and craftiness to get me to read and understand the Steps. My sponsor had a knack for getting through thick skulls like mine. Gradually, I came to understand the other side of life. I was never big on religion and spirituality; one could say I was spiritually illiterate. I was probably the most self-centered, fearful, and resentful person one could ever meet, like a wronged safecracker who believed the world owed him a living. My trust level was zero; my tolerance was sub-zero.

I always felt a bit different at AA meetings because of the time I did in jail. I thought nobody understood me because of my history of fights, guns, and drugs.

But a pretty blond gal showed me how foolish my chronic uniqueness syndrome was. She convinced me that all AAs share this sense of uniqueness at some point. She described her own past, including her violent tendencies. Here stood one of the most graceful and beautiful ladies I knew describing the kind of incidents I had survived. The exchange was unbelievable and helped crack the wall of isolation I had erected between myself and other AAs. I wasn't so different and tough after all.

My progress was halting and painful, but I persisted. I learned the dual obsessive nature of my malady and identified immediately with the strange mental blank spots mentioned in the Big Book. The chapter, "More About Alcoholism," drove the last nail into my coffin of denial when I saw myself on every page.

The sense of relief was indescribable. For the first time I realized that I was not a genetic screwup destined to die. Here, in black and white, was an explanation for my antisocial and borderline psychotic behavior while drunk. For the first time in a long, long while, I felt hope.

Here, in black and white, was an explanation for my antisocial and borderline psychotic behavior while drunk.

The lessons I have learned in AA are life-transforming. My entire emotional, psychological, social, and spiritual being has been completely revamped and reworked.

When I look in the mirror, I feel as if I am seeing an entirely different person. That distant figure of the past seems almost foreign to me now. I talk about the former Rick the way someone talks about a distant relative they once knew. I was spiritually destitute, with severely warped and distorted perceptions.

I've been clean and sober for fifteen years now and can honestly say that I have surprised myself. I graduated cum laude from university recently. I am in excellent physical condition, have published a book, earned a third-degree black belt in a martial art, and have been with the same AA gal for ten years. I've reunited with my baby and we enjoy great times together. The sense of peace, joy, and serenity enable me to live the Promises daily. I have a host of solid friends who take an active interest in my life. We help one another all the time. Gone are my selfish pursuits.

The greatest source of support comes from my Higher Power and regular attendance at a Big Book study group. There is an old-timer there named Bill who has been sober for almost a half-century. His sense of humor, genuine concern,

and overall disposition is a source of great inspiration to me. I always look forward to hearing his stentorian voice echo in the small room as I make my way downstairs. Despite his longevity in AA, he still makes coffee, sets up, and takes time to listen to the newcomers' woes and worries.

He gave me a ride home last night after the meeting, and we talked about basic home renovations. I have just moved into a nice little home with a beautiful backyard that backs into a greenbelt. I know Bill won't be with us forever, so I am learning everything I can from him, hoping I'll be able to pass on a fraction of it someday.

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I spend time passing it on now, but I think this volunteering must be kept secret in order to preserve its purity and intent. I am blessed with a handful of trusted and good friends who make a regular habit of doing dinner on the boys' night out. We enjoy great sharing sessions at these reunions and talk about things we ordinarily would not share at meetings. One might say that we engage in group sponsorship at such meetings. We open up with each other and keep ourselves accountable for the changes we need to make in our lives. I have grown in leaps and bounds because of them. A guy like me needs a team of sponsors.

I am currently completing an addictions diploma at another university and looking forward to a career in addiction counseling. It is apparent that success in sobriety hinges on regular meetings, doing those Steps, sponsorship, and plenty of prayer and meditation. All the answers I need are available, if only I take the time and seek. I don't blame the world for my situation anymore; I realize that I make my reality. I've crossed the threshold of being a BA(Bad Ass) and enjoy being a different type of BA (Baccalaureate). But I know that I could achieve nothing without being sober in AA.

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